

puddle,
pothole,
portal

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Joachim Bandau

Camille Blatrix

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& Harald Thys

Judith Hopf

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Lucie Stahl

Saul Steinberg

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Lina Viste Grønli

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and Jordan Wolfson.

Curated by Ruba Katrib, Curator,
SculptureCenter, and artist Camille Henrot.

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Foreword

Puddle, pothole, portal marks the inauguration of SculptureCenter's newly expanded building. At this significant moment in our organizational history, we build on our past and look to the future, so it is appropriate that this exhibition explores (among other things) the elastic potentiality of sculpture. Curators Ruba Katrib and Camille Henrot offer us a world of thresholds, moments in which the line between real and virtual, animate and inanimate, two-dimensional and three-dimensional, is illusory. The artworks in this exhibition offer us examples of how sculpture, in its fluid possibilities and its direct relationship to the body, mediates between these territories.

Puddle, pothole, portal reflects the values and ambitions of our program and continues the legacy of past exhibitions at SculptureCenter, such as *Grey Flags* (2006); *Knight's Move* (2010); and *A Disagreeable Object* (2012). Each of these exhibitions identified artists making important contributions to a current conversation. They also helped articulate "of-the-moment" ideas and approaches to art-making. In keeping with our practice of supporting and presenting new work for unique spaces, the curators have invited artists to create work that utilizes or responds to the new and existing architectural spaces and features created by our recent expansion. Artists have always been central to decision-making at SculptureCenter—as curators, advisors, and trustees—and inviting an artist to co-curate this exhibition affirms this collaborative facet in our mission.

First and foremost, I wish to thank Ruba Katrib and Camille Henrot for organizing this insightful and mischievous exhibition and for contributing to this catalogue. Katrib's text essay frames the work in a historical context, while Henrot's visual essay elegantly mixes references from multiple sources. We are grateful to Spyros Papapetros for his nimble and perceptive essay published here, and to Noah Venezia, who has brought a playful graphic sensibility both to the exhibition identity and this publication. A complex international exhibition does not happen without masterful coordination and execution. I am grateful to SculptureCenter's skillful and dedicated staff, all of whom made significant contributions to the realization of this project.

I would like to thank all the lenders and patrons who have helped make this exhibition possible, especially Shane Akeroyd for his generous underwriting of the exhibition and catalogue. Additional support was provided by Kathy and Steve Guttman. I would like to extend my

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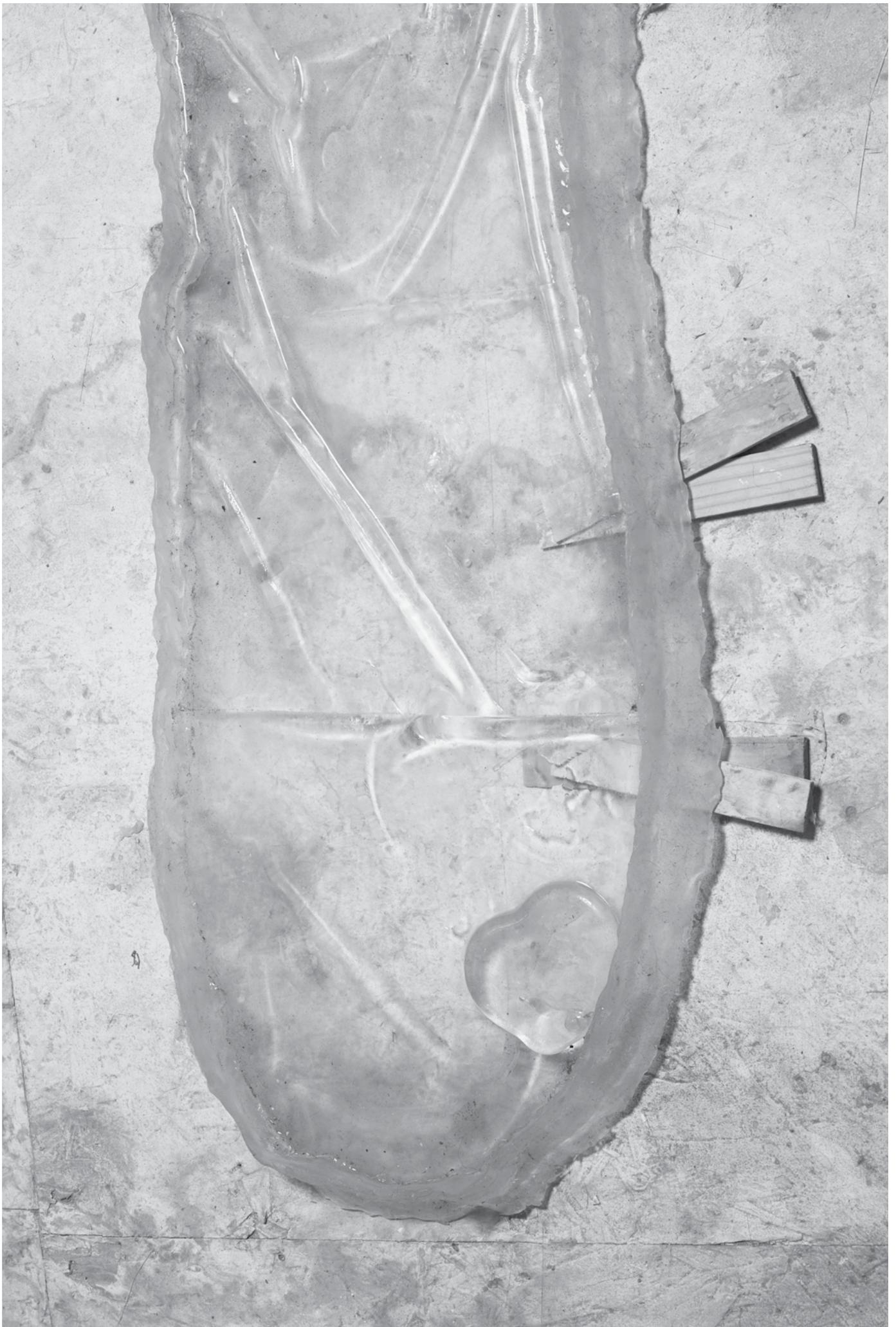
Finally, on behalf of the board and staff of SculptureCenter, I want to thank the participating artists who help us to see other worlds while better understanding our current one.

Mary Ceruti
Executive Director and Chief Curator

Mick Peter, *Almost Cut My Hair*, 2014. Jesmonite and steel. Installation view. Courtesy the artist and Tramway, Glasgow. Photo: Max Slaven

Win McCarthy, *Have I, / at last, / occurred to myself? (Having occurred lines 4-6)*, 2014. Detail. Resin, glass, wood, water. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Off Vendome, Dusseldorf. Photo: Jeffery Sturges.





What's so Funny About Out-of-Control Machines?

In the world of cartoons, nothing is quite what it seems. Machines have minds of their own, animals are protagonists, gravity is out of whack, pain is fleeting, and death is just another gag. In the early twentieth century, animations brought comic relief to new and complex relations between people, capitalist technologies, and space. As Walter Benjamin famously noted, “American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies.” Their “double meaning” provokes horror—at manifestations of power and violence that have real-life equivalents—and childish amusement.¹ Different forms of this condition are evident in the early Disney film *Alice's Egg Plant* (1925), in which Alice, played by a live actor, and her cartoon cat buddy Julius (an imitation of Felix the Cat) run a small egg factory. When they demand that their chickens produce more eggs than usual for

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2008), 38.

an incoming order, the chickens go on strike. Alice and Julius trick the birds into producing the needed eggs by charging them a one-egg admission to a fight, seamlessly swapping the economic bottom line of work for that of entertainment. As the chickens enter the fight, Alice and Julius load up their truck with the eggs. To get to the punch line . . . As soon as they speed off, all the eggs fall off and break, while Alice and Julius drive on obliviously toward the horizon. Tragedy becomes comical when the system malfunctions, to the delight of viewers, who express their own resistance to the abuse of power with laughter.

The potential for real and cartoon machines—such as the heedless truck—to wreak chaos and destruction is also evident in the Fleischer Studios' 1934 cartoon *Ha! Ha! Ha!*, from the series *Out of the Inkwell* featuring Betty Boop and Koko the Clown. The lines between reality and fantasy are reconfigured within this short—an early demonstration of “reality effects” and simulation, ideas that came to dominate a lot of postmodern thinking. A live cartoonist (Dave Fleischer) quickly draws Betty into existence, and she and her sidekick Koko, who jumps out of an inkwell, enter a world that switches between live-action and the animated.² When Koko gets a toothache after biting into an actual candy bar (perhaps suggesting that real-life sugar is too much for a cartoon character), Betty herself draws an animated dentist's office, where she attempts to treat him. While numbing his mouth, she goes overboard with the laughing gas. Not only do she and Koko lose it, but the fumes rise from the page of the drawing and enter the “real” world, where clocks, typewriters, mailboxes, cars, and actual urban dwellers are immediately affected, breaking into uncontrollable laughter and bringing to a halt any sense of order.

In these early examples of genre-crossing films (made at a time when genres weren't yet so fixed), a feverish humor tested the limits of the physical world. With the relatively recent technologies of film and animation in the early 1900s, space could be dramatically reconfigured. New machines could produce new imaginative realms. Artists at the time were attracted to cartoons because cartoonists played with “abstraction, forceful outlines, geometric forms and flatness, question of space and time and logic—that is to say, a questioning of space that is not geographical but graphic, and time as non-linear but convoluted.”³ Additionally, operating nearly as political resistance, cartoons were produced for societies that were transitioning from the cultural mores of the Victorian era to modernity, with all its progressive ideals

² Dave Fleischer's brother, Max Fleischer, invented rotoscoping, a technique in which animators draw over each frame of film footage to create the effect of motion. This manual application was later replaced by electronic technology, “drawing” being the link between early animation techniques and the digital alteration of images. See Wikipedia, s.v. “rotoscoping,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotoscoping, accessed July 20, 2014.

³ Esther Leslie has discussed the influence of cartoons and caricatures on George Grosz and Otto Dix; among the other artists she mentions as being interested in animations and cartoons are René Clair, Francis Picabia, and Fernand Léger. Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory, and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2004), 19.

and traumatic impediments. Cartoons were a self-reflexive and enjoyable form of subversive entertainment. Stress was suddenly funny.

In *Puddle, pothole, portal*, the ideas surrounding animation and cartooning inform a presentation that enacts a similar sort of hysteria around real and imagined spaces, the body, and flatness and depth in relation to technology. The content refers not only to early twentieth-century cartoons, but also to the groundbreaking art of Saul Steinberg, the innovative animated film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), and media-based (or -promoted) children's entertainment—sites where a particularly amusing education around space, the body, and objects takes place. Childish entertainment—whether movies, TV shows, or toys—that also appeals to adults signals a mischief that challenges the constraints of reality as configured by society. While celebrating the rule-breaking of the past, present, and imagined future, the exhibition questions the relationship between humor and technology, objects and representation, and drawing and sculpture.

The humor in *Puddle, pothole, portal* is immature, the kind where you knock something over to see what will happen. It profits from a misunderstanding—or freedom from understanding—of physics or law and order, and requires the invention of objects and spaces that are fluid and adaptable. The humor extends to the realm of physical comedy, which, according to Freud, originates in a physical exaggeration or misappropriation of a shared understanding of space, expression, and gesture.⁴ Explaining “situation comedy,” he writes: “We are deriving the comedy here from the relation of human beings to the often overwhelming power of the external world; to a human being's mental [*seelisch*] processes this is also represented by the conventions and necessary demands of society, indeed even by his own bodily needs.”⁵ This relation between the sensory and the comic accentuates clumsiness, a lack of mastery over space and the body, and unexpected shifts in scale and energy expenditure. Philosopher Henri Bergson argued that humor is tied to the mechanical, that it provides us with the “illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement.”⁶ This is evident in early twentieth-century cinema colored by the vaudeville-aligned New Humor, where the tricks of film were found in the film technology itself—the generative machine became part of the joke. The humor was centered on gags, stunts, nonsense, and machine-like repetition, with humans behaving like machines

4 Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 186.

5 *Ibid.*, 192.

6 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Rockville, Md.: Wildside Press, 2008), 36.

and vice versa; the excesses of slapstick made it into a sort of special-effects machine for humor.⁷ As Michael North explains in *Machine Age Comedy*, “Critics reacted so harshly to the New Humor not just because it was ill-mannered but also because it was creating laughter from the very aspects of modern life that well-intentioned people were supposed to fear and dislike.”⁸ In the early age of cartoons, the politics of entertainment were discussed by filmmakers, philosophers, and theorists, who made prescient speculations on the role of humor and animation in a technological age. Sergei Eisenstein was optimistic, as was Walter Benjamin, who pondered Mickey Mouse’s ability to release us from repression, while Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were sure we were numbing our intellects.

The title of the exhibition *Puddle, pothole, portal* refers to the transitory natural, the urban mechanical, and the virtual conducive: all things that could magically transport you into another world . . . or give you a flat tire.⁹ The exhibition sees the comic as expressed through cartoons as, in part, a response to early twentieth-century technological developments. It also asks for a consideration of humor in relation to a contemporary understanding of flatness and depth within a digital era. As the technologies we live with today are still relatively new, we haven’t achieved mastery of them, especially as the rate of their production quickens. We still joke about the hand gestures needed to operate a smartphone, and mock a near future filled with “glassholes.”¹⁰ This concern recalls Charlie Chaplin’s exaggerated movements on the assembly line in *Modern Times* (1936), and his anticipatory critique of future innovations when his boss suddenly appears on a video screen to catch him taking a smoke break in the bathroom. It is believed that Chaplin, a key figure in shifting societal humor, feared that cartoons would put live-action cinema out of business because they were far better at articulating the physical comedy in demand at the time.¹¹ Underscoring the intertwined relationship between physical comedy and animated potentiality, in the 1923 film *Felix in Hollywood* a cartoon Chaplin accuses his equally famous contemporary, Felix the Cat, of stealing his material.¹² Just a few years later, Felix would indeed surpass his human inspiration and counterpart and become the star of the first test television broadcast.¹³ We are now able to take virtual space into real space, and, extending our field of vision, can sometimes eliminate the distinction between the virtual and real realms altogether. The potential for gags and reactive physical humor emerges from our relationship to technologies and their implications for our life and work. These evolving technologies also influence our understanding of time, gesture, and expression, expanding the areas that humor can explore.

7 Tom Gunning compares the machine-like quality of slapstick to that of a stick producing an overly loud, violent, and “fake” sound. This effect in relation to machines and comedy is a focus in his discussion, particularly theorization of the “crazy machine.” For more detailed discussion, see Tom Gunning, “Mechanisms of Laughter: The Devices of Slapstick,” in Tom Paulus and Rob King, *Slapstick Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 140–41.
8 Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

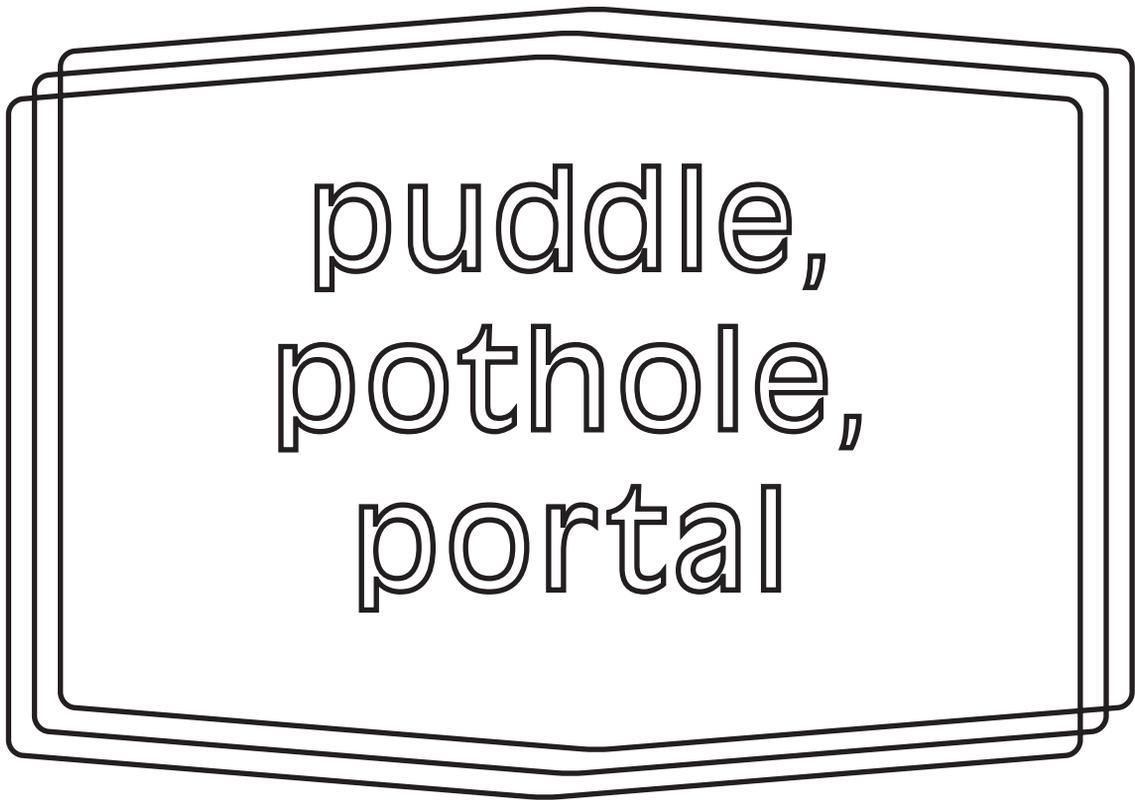
9 A nice coincidence, the exhibition was titled long before reading Tom Gunning’s essay, cited in note 7, where he quotes Donald Crafton: “Gags are the potholes, detours and flat tires encountered by the tin lizzy of the narrative on its way to the end of the film. It is important to note that potholes and flat tires are indeed part of slapstick theory.” Gunning, “Mechanisms of Laughter,” 148.

10 While there have been jokes about the new Google Glass “glassholes,” as devotees are disparagingly called, there have also been incidents of violence in which—wearers of the new technology have been attacked on account of their total immersion in virtual reality. See Doug Gross, “Google Glass targeted as symbol by anti-tech crowd,” CNN, April 15, 2014, www.cnn.com/2014/04/14/tech/mobile/google-glass-attack/, accessed May 20, 2014.

11 Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, 15–16 (see note 3).

12 Ibid.

13 Felix appears often in Mark Leckey’s work. In his performative lecture “Mark Leckey in the Long Tail” (2009), the artist discussed the figure’s transition from animated character to dematerialized technology. See Esther Leslie, “Mark Leckey’s Anima Mundi,” *Afterall*, no. 33 (Summer 2013).



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